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**“If a Muslim says ‘homo’, nothing gets done”:  
Racist discourse and in-group identity construction in an LGBT youth group<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article presents ethnographic data emerging from research with a group of LGBT young people, detailing the construction of a shared identity. Using discourse analysis, it shows how the group members position people of South Asian descent as a homogenous out-group, one framed as ‘other’ to their own in-group identity of ‘non-Asian’ due to the assumption that Asian people are homophobic. It is argued that this very local form of identity construction is facilitated by broader discourses of Islamophobia, as well as homonormative ideologies positioning gay people as *white*. The article therefore provides evidence to support Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) claim that identity positioning relates not only to the interactional moment and the norms of a given ethnographic context, but that it also encompasses macro-level discourses and ideologies. It also, however, reveals the pervasiveness of Islamophobic discourses in Britain today, and the marginalisation of LGBT people of colour.

(LGBT identity, racist discourse, homonormativity, Islamophobia)

## INTRODUCTION

In this article, I focus on the ways in which a group of British lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people jointly construct a meaningful, shared sense of self, despite the intersecting factors influencing their individual identities (including their gender identity, sexuality, and ethnicity). I argue that the young people – all members of an LGBT youth group – produce a localised persona by discursively constructing an out-group that they position themselves as oppositional to. Specifically, I argue that the young people position themselves as comparatively more legitimate citizens than people of South Asian descent, who they frame as being inherently homophobic. Through ethnographically-informed discourse analysis of interview data with the young people, I consider the ways in which the young people use racist language to position South Asian people as homophobic and, in turn, as outsiders in an otherwise progressive, Western society.

The approach I take here considers identity to be intersubjectively constructed in discourse, and to be achieved by positioning oneself in relation to broader ideological identity categories (such as ‘lesbian’) as well as local, ethnographically-salient identity positions (such as ‘youth group member’). In this sense, I follow the principle of positionality set out by Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 591) as part of a sociocultural linguistics approach. This allows analysts to consider individual, temporary moments of interaction as contributing to the construction of locally-salient personas which, in turn, are informed by broader cultural discourses. In order to analyse these temporary moments of interaction, I consider speakers’ stance-taking: the ways in which they use language to align themselves with (or against) the roles and personas of others in an interaction as well as to broader cultural concepts, discourses, and other social groups (Jaffe 2009).

I also make use of Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) ‘tactics of intersubjectivity’ framework: the relational ways in which speakers position themselves and others (often

through stance-taking). Bucholtz and Hall propose three pairs of tactics: *adequation* and *distinction*; *authentication* and *denaturalisation*; *authorisation* and *illegitimation*. Adequation is an interactive tactic whereby speakers emphasise their similarity to one another or to a related group, whereas distinction involves distancing oneself from an identity that contrasts or conflicts with that being constructed. Authentication and denaturalisation explain the reification of identities, with the former tactic concerning a speaker's overt claim to authenticity, and the latter focused on revealing the falseness of another subject. Authorisation is concerned with the legitimization of an identity or practice, often by drawing on discourses of power or ideology, whilst illegitimation does the same to dismiss (rather than affirm) an identity. Through close analysis of the young people's linguistic choices and use of discourse features, I highlight moments whereby they make use of these tactics to construct their own group-specific identity.

It has often been found that speakers construct their own identities by emphasising their difference to others, as will be shown to be the case here. By taking stances against others, groups of speakers may work collaboratively to position themselves as a coherent unit which is defined by its difference to a particular out-group. The community of practice (CoP) approach (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992) is particularly useful in understanding this, as it allows a view of speakers working collaboratively to produce a shared sense of self. The approach posits that groups of speakers can develop shared ways of doing things (practices) as a result of their mutual engagement and interaction together; often, this is in opposition or direct contrast to other CoPs, and these practices enable a group to project a coherent, self-composed identity. In Eckert's (2000) analysis of a US high school, for example, two CoPs are identified (the 'Jocks' and the 'Burnouts'); the Jocks are focused on academic and extra-curricular achievement, whilst the Burnouts are shown to largely reject school structures and systems. Eckert shows how these young people develop linguistic and other stylistic practices

which allow them to sit on either side of a constructed binary between the two CoPs, and to project their identities in direct opposition to one another.

Bucholtz (1999: 211) also demonstrates the relevance of oppositional identity construction, again considering a CoP within a high school. She considers how girls who identify themselves as ‘nerds’ do so by actively rejecting the practices of the ‘cool kids’ in their school; instead of popular youth slang, they use contrasting, high-culture language styles including Latinate phrases and complex vocabulary. Similarly, Jones (2012) shows how a CoP of middle-aged, middle-class lesbian women in Britain position themselves as ‘authentic lesbians’ by rejecting that which they consider to be ‘girly’; in doing so, the women actively construct a ‘dykey’, butch persona which allows them to position themselves as opposite to those they perceive as less legitimate. Studies such as these demonstrate the ability of groups of speakers to construct their own coherent sense of self by opposing those who they consider themselves to be different from. In doing so, it is possible for them to position themselves as comparatively more authentic, legitimate or *better* than the constructed other, and to do this through their everyday interaction.

To understand the meaning of language as it is used in these momentary situations, it is necessary to appreciate its significance in relation to a given context and in light of the typical practices of a CoP. This may be achieved by employing an ethnographic method. For this reason, I spent four months with the participants in the research detailed below, between July and October 2012, spending time with them whilst they interacted within their CoP environment – an LGBT youth group. To better explain the nature of the identity positioning that took place amongst the members of the LGBT youth group detailed in this article, I offer below an account of the ethnographic context in which the data collection took place.

## THE YOUTH GROUP

The borough where the youth group was situated was in the North of England, and had a population of approximately 250,000 people. Historically, this was a working-class area with traditional industries that had largely vanished by the end of the twentieth century. Data from the Office of National Statistics showed the population of the area to be around 94% white during the time of my fieldwork, with the largest number of ethnic minority people being of Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi descent. Broadly speaking, the members of the youth group reflected the demographics of the local area; all were from working-class backgrounds, none had plans to gain university-level qualifications, several were in community colleges taking vocational courses or working in apprenticeship schemes and others were in local state-funded high schools. None of the group members were Asian, however, and indeed there was a general discourse of racism within the group – I heard most of the young people use the word ‘Paki’<sup>2</sup> to describe (South) Asian people, for instance.

The group met one evening per week from 6pm-9pm in a local youth centre. I gained access to the group via David<sup>3</sup>, a 30-year-old gay man who was employed by the local council as an LGBT educator and youth worker. David had been running the group for several years, and was committed to providing the young people with a social space, but also to offering advice in a pastoral role. Those who attended the group had typically been referred to David by teachers or social workers, often out of concern for their emotional wellbeing. Almost every young person that I met had experienced ill treatment as a result of their gender or sexuality, in the form of bullying, online abuse, harassment in the street, or rejection by their families. Most had self-harmed, and some had attempted to take their own life. The importance of a social space where they could interact freely, with adults who offered impartial and non-judgmental advice, and where they had the opportunity to meet other LGBT young people cannot, therefore, be overstated.

David frequently tried to engage the young people in educational activities, such as learning about LGBT history, yet the young people were reluctant to get involved; their preference was simply to relax together in a safe space. Often, their conversations included telling one another about homophobic bullying that they had experienced, and in this sense they sometimes gave one another support and advice (though a youth worker was usually present, too). I was unable to make recordings of these general conversations because not all members wished to be part of my research. For those that did wish to be involved, it was agreed that – in return – I would help them write an article for a popular British magazine aimed at the LGBT community, as they felt they typically had no ‘voice’. I conducted interviews in friendship pairs of willing participants, which enabled me to write the magazine article; the data analysed below comes from these interviews.

In the interviews, I asked about the young people’s experiences and opinions about being LGBT in the twenty-first century. Most of the conversations concerned their experiences of homophobia, and thus it is from this perspective that their identity work in these moments took place. Seven of the young people agreed to take part in the research, six of whom are included here. Three friendship pairs emerged for these interviews; one with two cisgender young gay men (Josh, 22; Ryan, 16), one with two cisgender lesbians (Paige, 15; Emma, 16), and the other with Bailey (16), a transgender girl and Kyle (18), a transgender man. The only non-white member of the CoP was Bailey, whose mother was white and father was black. Bailey was also the only bisexual member of the group, with the others identifying as lesbian or gay except for Kyle, who was straight. Mostly, the young people were between 15-18, with the exception of Josh who had been part of the group for eight years and only stopped attending shortly after my research ended.

The identity work that the young people engaged in differs considerably from that shown in previous studies. Work exploring the interaction of groups of speakers sharing a

non-heteronormative<sup>4</sup> identity has typically found them to draw on broader discourses – such as stereotypes or jokes – from within gay culture (Barrett 1998; Jones 2012, 2014; Queen 1998, 2005; Morrish and Sauntson 2007). For LGB speakers, it has been argued, this allows the construction of a mutually intelligible identity based around their sexuality, one which positions them as fundamentally different to the heteronormative mainstream. In contrast, the young people in this group spoke of disliking Pride events, for example, and were frequently at pains to argue that their sexual or gender identity was only a small part of their lives. Indeed, they articulated a desire to be seen and treated as ‘just the same’ as their heterosexual peers, actively avoiding that which marked them out as different to mainstream, heteronormative society. One way of explaining this is to consider the relevance of these speakers’ generation; they were all born in the 1990s, and were entering adulthood as LGBT people during the 2010s. Unlike the adults typically considered in previous research with lesbian and gay people, then, the members of this LGBT youth group have grown up during a rise in neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism concerns the liberation of individuals within a capitalist model and the liberation of free markets and trades (Harvey 2005:2) and, to some extent, LGBT culture can be seen to align with this new economic and political ideology. For example, a shift in attitudes has been witnessed; whereas once lesbians and gay men were widely discriminated against, they are now frequently perceived as a target market of consumers (Brown 2012: 1065). According to Duggan (2003: 50), this has led to a shift in gay politics towards ‘homonormativity’; rather than contesting heteronormativity, she argues, gay culture is now depoliticised and ‘anchored in domesticity and consumption’, with their status as equal citizens being the priority. In the USA, the repeal of the ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell’ policy for gay people serving in the US army provides some evidence for this view; Peterson’s (2010) analysis of discourses surrounding the repeal posits that the reframing of gay people as



willing to die for their country partly enabled this, as they began to be recognised as *citizens* first and foremost. Similarly, discourses surrounding same-sex marriage campaigns have repeatedly positioned same-sex relationships as equally valid to heterosexual ones (Bachmann 2011: 95; Van der Bom *et al* 2015), an argument which has now led to equal marriage for same-sex British couples. Homonormativity, then, serves to authenticate homosexuality through institutional means and by focusing on citizenship; this is entirely relevant to the identity construction outlined in this paper, in which the youths position Asian people as illegitimate British citizens by othering and marginalising them, as well as framing them as a threat to LGBT equality. In turn, they construct a specifically non-Asian identity for themselves, and validate their own status as citizens; the analysis below draws on Bucholtz and Hall's tactics of intersubjectivity to explain this.

## **BRITISH VERSUS ASIAN**

The population of people of South Asian descent in the local area where the young people lived was perceived as significant by members of the youth group. Indeed, the building which housed the LGBT youth group also shared a site with the local Madrasa (a school for teaching the Islamic religion), and there were therefore plenty of opportunities for interaction between the mostly white young people in this CoP and young Asian people in their everyday lives. As mentioned above, I witnessed casual racism from the young people in the youth group, an example of which is below. In an interview conducted with Emma and Paige, Emma's response to a question about whether she experienced homophobia in school framed Asian people as un-British:

### Extract 1

- 1 E but I've never been called anything really like how a
- 2 lot of other people get it (.) I've had looks like but people
- 3 like going 'yerr' when I used to pick- when you'd go upstairs
- 4 like when /I first came out-

- 5 P /and everyone's like ah there's that lesbian had to  
 6 get changed with us and everything [don't look at us!]  
 7 E [Yeah I never I actually]  
 8 never got anything [like that] it's like I went in the  
 9 P [I did]  
 10 E changing room and there'd be a few Asian girls and a few other  
 11 (.) British girls who would loo- give me some real dirty looks.  
 12 I mean I only come out in the last few months of school so  
 13 I just got on with it it didn't bother me I mean they've got  
 14 they've got their all opinions I get that their religion says it's  
 15 not right so::  
 16 L yeah  
 17 E I understand that it's not- I know that they- it's just how  
 18 (.) they've been brought up so it doesn't (.) bother me.

In this extract, Emma positions herself as relatively unscathed by homophobia; indeed, she was one of the few young people I met who did not report serious bullying, and who had sought out the group as a social space rather than having been referred by a concerned adult. She indicates her awareness of the typical experience of others in the CoP, and in the broader imagined gay community, though, referring to 'other people' in line 2. In line 5, Paige latches onto Emma's initial discussion of the 'looks' she has received to share her own experience when in her school changing rooms. She mimics the other students, implying that they referred to her as 'that lesbian' and that they pleaded 'don't look at us!'. In doing so, Paige draws on the tactic of distinction to position herself, as 'that lesbian', in contrast to 'us', her (presumably heterosexual) peers. By foregrounding this difference, Paige positions herself as a member of a minority group; the use of the determiner 'that', whether a verbatim quote or not, emphasises the othering behaviour of her fellow students in the school changing rooms, indicating that she was also marginalised by them. This was a typical example of how the young people talked about their experiences of homophobia; it usually concerned other young people of their own age referring to them as different, strange, or other. The CoP practice of discussing these incidents together enabled them to reinforce their own sense of legitimacy and normalcy, often by going on to marginalise or demonise those

who had been homophobic towards them. Often, but not always, this took shape via racist discourse, where those cast as the protagonists in a narrative of homophobia were also Asian.

Emma's comment in lines 10-11 illustrates this, as she positions 'Asian' as oppositional to 'British'. This is evident from the pause in line 11 between 'other' and 'British', and the emphasis on 'and' in line 10; Emma refers to the actions of 'a few Asian girls' and then, separately, that of 'British girls'. The pause after 'other' suggests hesitancy in using the modifier 'British', perhaps due to uncertainty in what the appropriate terminology would be to describe non-Asian people. Rather than referring to the Asian girls as also being *British* girls, then, Emma draws a contrast between them; given the demographics of the local area, it is highly likely that the 'British' girls in her story were white. In drawing this contrast, then, Emma positions 'Asian' people as different to British people, and therefore frames 'British' as an identity which does not include Asian people. Furthermore, by polarising the two identities, she constructs a notion of 'Asian' not as an ethnic category but as a nationality, akin to being British.

Emma's language in lines 13-14 further positions her Asian peers as different to her, with the repeated use of the third-person pronouns *they* and *their*: 'I mean they've got they've got their all opinions I get that their religion says it's not right'. This language both others Asian people and assumes homogeneity in terms of a shared religion. Furthermore, Emma implies through this utterance that the apparently shared culture of this homogenous group of people is the *cause* of homophobia: 'it's just how they've been brought up' (lines 17-18). As well as using the tactic of distinction to emphasise the difference between herself and 'them', Emma's stance-taking makes use of the tactic of illegitimation here; the adverb 'just' enables her to dismiss the apparent homophobic beliefs of this homogenised group of people by framing them as an oddity, or as holding a set of values belonging to an Other. In articulating her tolerance of this ('so it doesn't bother me', line 18), Emma also reduces the significance

of these beliefs by framing them as of little impact on her; she does not articulate any distress or upset at having experienced ‘some real dirty looks’ (line 11).

The effect of Emma’s narrative, here, is for Asian people to be constructed as both an Other which can be easily dismissed as a homogenous group with one upbringing and religion (which is assumed to be homophobic). The assumption that Asian people are homophobic because of a single upbringing and religion was echoed by Ryan and Josh in their interview, too, when talking about their experiences of homophobia:

### Extract 2

- 1 R I’ve not come across one Asian well I have tell a lie but I
- 2 did not come across one Asian in my school that did not give
- 3 me abuse for being gay. (2) half-Asians correct they were nice
- 4 to me @(. ) ‘cause they don’t strictly follow their religion but
- 5 people who follow- like Christians as well they don’t agree
- 6 with it but (1) then you make the point to them God made
- 7 everybody how they are::
- 8 L mmhmm
- 9 R then they’ve got nothing to say.
- 10 L mmhmm
- 11 R God made me gay.
- 12 J the thing that I think with religio::n and different people
- 13 coming over from different countrie::s and making it the way
- 14 that it is (.) is they need to:: if they want to follow their
- 15 religion that’s fine but they need to adhere by (.) our (.)
- 16 culture (.) and if gays are allowed in this country then they
- 17 shouldn’t say anything about it. (1) because I’m not- we don’t
- 18 go over to Pakistan (.) and promote gay people it’s not
- 19 allowed
- 20 R or::/
- 21 J /you couldn’t do it.

Here, Ryan and Josh construct the category of ‘Asian’ and then – like Emma in Extract 1 – label people within that category as having a *different* religion and culture and, consequently, as being homophobic. Ryan’s claim in lines 3-4 that ‘half-Asians’ are less homophobic because ‘they don’t strictly follow their religion’ explicitly links race with religion, and the use of the third person pronoun ‘they’ effectively positions this group of people as different to him. In this sense, Ryan – as Emma did in the previous extract – uses

the tactic of distinction to position himself as holding a different identity with a different set of values and beliefs. Premodifying 'Asian' with 'half' (line 3) also implies that being Asian is a gradable or countable quality; claiming that this group are less loyal to 'their' religion than 'full' Asians indicates that Ryan sees being Asian not as an ethnic background but instead as a cultural or religious phenomenon. It also serves to construct 'Asians' as a homogenous group with one faith, thus leaving no room for the possibility that some Asian people have different beliefs, or none at all. It is reasonable to argue that Ryan's use of 'their religion' (line 4) is intended to refer to Islam, since the young people often used the terms 'Muslim' and 'Asian' interchangeably and as synonyms in their talk together. Indeed, 'Asian' is, itself, presented as a religion in this moment; this is apparent from Ryan's comparative use of 'Christians' in line 5, a label which he uses as he did 'Asian' to define a category of homogenous people with homophobic views.

Josh's turn in this interaction further serves to reinforce a polarised 'us and them' distinction, once again revealing the relevance of pronoun choice to the tactic of distinction. Josh uses inclusive, first person plural pronouns to refer to British people ('our' line 15, 'we' line 17) and the third person 'they' and 'their' (lines 14-16) to position Asian people as an out-group. Indeed, Josh goes a step further than Ryan; he not only positions Asian people as different to himself, he frames them as immigrants who have been 'coming over from different countries' (line 13), later specified as Pakistan (line 18). Like Emma in the previous extract, Josh glosses over the fact that Asian people may also be British in favour of othering them; in doing so, he also is able to use the tactic of illegitimation to show how 'their religion' (lines 14-15) clashes with 'our culture' (lines 15-16). Josh's stance-taking therefore frames Asian people as homophobic in this moment, implying that 'they' have a problem with gay people but that they 'shouldn't say anything about it' (line 17), using the tactic of authorisation to position himself – as a member of 'our culture' – as morally superior.

Like Emma in Extract 1, Josh also articulates a degree of tolerance towards this apparently homogenous group of homophobic Asians ('that's fine', line 15). This reflects what Brown (2006) refers to as political 'discourses of tolerance' that are prevalent in modern Western culture; being tolerant is held up as a goal to be achieved, with official government policies and institutional mission statements focused on being anti-prejudiced and liberal. Yet, Brown argues, this tolerance relies on a discourse of difference, whereby our toleration of a particular group serves to *other* that group, usually because they are seen as being *intolerant* when compared to the 'civilised' and therefore superior ways of the West – a point also made by Ahmed (2000: 97). In this sense, we may see Josh's (and Emma's, in the previous extract) illegitimation of Asian people's beliefs as in keeping with much of the political discourse surrounding cultural diversity in Britain today; they position Asian people – with the assumed religion of Islam – as irrelevant to the apparently more progressive Western culture they have been socialised into, yet also position themselves as good citizens by articulating their tolerance towards 'them'. Yet the young people also draw a seemingly natural link between Asian people and homophobia, and from Josh, Ryan and Emma's utterances it is clear that this is a primary reason for the repeated use of the tactic of distinction. In no small part, as illustrated below, this was enabled by the young people's articulation of a society in which homophobia is not taken seriously in comparison to that other social taboo: racism.

## **HOMOPHOBIA VERSUS RACISM**

The construction of the category 'Asian' to refer to an ideologically homogenous group of homophobic Muslim people, it has been argued so far, reflects broader cultural discourses that have influenced the youth group members. As young, white, working-class British people, they are perhaps particularly likely to have absorbed modern Islamophobic

rhetoric; this has been compounded by the instances when they experienced homophobic abuse from their Asian peers (though the young people reported experiencing homophobia from non-Asian people, too). As a group of people who themselves share a minority status, they are also particularly likely to construct an in-group identity, one that allows them to define themselves in a way that is meaningful to them and which validates their status. This is certainly not to justify or condone the use of racist language, but rather to offer some explanation of the oppositional identity construction that took place within this CoP. It has been shown above that the young people constructed an out-group of Asian people, a category which they placed themselves in opposition to due to Asian people's ethnicity, cultural and religious background, and supposedly inevitable bigotry towards LGBT people. The construction of this out-group, and the positioning of themselves as a distinct and comparative in-group, was enabled partly because of the presumed homophobia that came from the out-group, then. For that reason, the young people often talked about a supposed 'double standard' where racism was concerned. This is particularly clear in Ryan's speech in Extract 3, below.

### Extract 3

- 1 R it happens all the time it's like when I used to smoke at work
- 2 and I used to sit outside and have a fag<sup>5</sup> somebody'd fucking
- 3 drive past and whistle at me and then when I turn round they'd
- 4 be swearing at me 'faggot faggot' out the window oh it makes
- 5 me so angry:: (XX) but it's like d'you know if (.) there were
- 6 an Asian person per se in front of a police man
- 7 L mmhmm
- 8 R or woman not being sexist @(.)
- 9 L @(.)
- 10 R if I walked up to that person and said 'you Paki', right, I
- 11 would probably get arrested (.) for rac- for racial abuse. Then
- 12 if me and Josh had fell out and Josh were stood in front of
- 13 a policeman or woman and I walked up to him and said 'you
- 14 fucking faggot' (.) I'd get told off and that were it.
- 15 L mmhmm
- 16 R and probably get sent away. (1) it's o- apparently on the same
- 17 borderline but it's not tret<sup>6</sup> that way (.) even by the people
- 18 who made this rule so (.) it's a disgrace.

In line 1, Ryan responds to my question of whether he regularly experienced homophobia. He suggests that it is frequent ('it happens all the time', line 1), and goes on to present a hypothetical scenario which he positions as an everyday occurrence: 'somebody'd fucking drive past and whistle at me and then when I turn round they'd be swearing at me *faggot, faggot*' (lines 2-4). He expresses that this makes him 'so angry' (line 5), yet he has not up until this point blamed a particular type of person or group of people for this homophobic behaviour. His use of the conjunction 'but', following this, indicates the beginning of a conciliatory stance or one which will somehow contradict his previous stance, yet instead Ryan uses it to link his anger at homophobia more broadly with a hypothetical situation involving an Asian person and a police officer (line 6). The connection between these two utterances is not obvious at first, though it then becomes clear that Ryan is linking his frustration at experiencing homophobia with his perception that it is not taken seriously. He articulates this not by positioning Asian people as homophobes, as we have seen in the extracts above, but by constructing an opposition between racism and homophobia as concepts or crimes.

To take his stance that homophobia is prevalent and tolerated, Ryan presents a second hypothetical scenario, one where he is both racist and homophobic and yet treated differently: 'if I...said *you Paki* I would probably get arrested for racial abuse...[if I] said *you fucking faggot* I'd get told off and that were it...and probably get sent away [to prison]' (lines 10-16). Ryan's stance-taking which follows this, that 'it's a disgrace' (line 18) that this double standard occurs, is enabled only by his presentation of this hypothetical scenario as a very likely one; his use of 'probably' in lines 11 and 16 does mitigate the certainty of his proposed outcome somewhat (it is notable that he does not choose an adverb such as 'definitely', for example), yet also allows him to position it as more than likely that racism would be taken



more seriously than homophobia. The apparent distinction between racism as opposed to homophobia is also emphasised by his use of higher register lexis and syntax to outline the former scenario ('I would probably get arrested for racial abuse', line 11) compared to the latter ('I'd get told off [for homophobia] and that were it', line 14). This serves to frame the punishment for homophobia as less serious or severe than for racism, allowing Ryan to take a confident stance that these two situations are not treated equally ('it's apparently on the same borderline but it's not tret that way', lines 16-17). In doing so, he uses the tactic of authorisation, implying knowledge of the legal system in order to more legitimately express his contempt for this unfair system and position himself, in turn, as a member of a marginalised group.

Though Ryan does not explicitly position Asian people themselves as being fundamentally homophobic in this extract, he does construct an opposition between them and gay people. He does this within his second hypothetical scenario by making use of the two pejorative category labels 'Paki' (line 10) and 'faggot' (line 14) and positioning them as oppositional to one another. He outlines a scenario in which an Asian person is called a 'Paki' and a gay person is called a 'faggot', yet underlying this construction is an important assumption: that a 'Paki' cannot also be a 'faggot' or, put less crudely, that a man of South Asian descent may not also identify as gay. This assumed binary was fundamental in much of the young people's identity construction, whereby they positioned themselves as an in-group of LGBT people in direct contrast to an out-group of Asian people. Through the construction of these two categories as binary opposites, it is also possible to argue with some logic that gay people will be racist and Asian people will be homophobic. Indeed, Ryan's claims in the above extract reflected a specific argument that I often heard within the group: young Asian people are homophobic and typically go unpunished, whereas LGBT people get into trouble if they use racist language. For example, when Emily and Paige told me about homophobia in

their schools, they argued that the teachers failed to act; Paige claimed to have been called a ‘lesbian fuck up’ by an Asian girl, to which she told me she responded with a racist comment. According to Paige, she was put in detention for racism but the homophobia did not lead to any disciplinary action. Ryan’s stance that ‘it’s a disgrace’, above, therefore reflects the anger felt by members of this LGBT group regarding this apparent ‘double standard’. As will be shown below, this feeling was often articulated in relation to Asian people themselves, specifically with the assumption that ‘they’ are homophobic.

### ASIANS AS HOMOPHOBES

Extract 4, below, comes from an interview I conducted with Bailey and Kyle, both of whom identified as trans. I asked the question ‘do you think things are equal now for LGBT people?’, a question Bailey initially answered by talking about homophobia and transphobia that she had experienced. Bailey went on to express her disgust at a television advertisement she had seen, in which two heterosexual men fall asleep next to one another on a sofa when watching a film. Whilst the men are asleep, their female partners rearrange their arms so that it looks as though they are in an intimate embrace. When the men wake up, they are horrified, and the women laugh. From line 1, Bailey tries to explain why she feels that this is unfair:

#### Extract 4

- 1 B you wouldn’t- I don’t know how to say this but you wouldn’t
- 2 make fun of black people or Muslims or:: (.) f-fat people to a
- 3 certain extent on TV/
- 4 L /no/
- 5 B /so why pick on gay people or trans
- 6 people?
- 7 K because (.) if you actually went up to a (.) a Muslim person
- 8 and actually said (.) Paki
- 9 L Mm-hmm
- 10 K you’d get into trouble straight away but if it were (1) a
- 11 Muslim goes up to a gay person and says (.) homo (.) nothing
- 12 gets done. ‘cause it- it’s not- it should be classed as racism
- 13 but it’s not.

As Ryan did in Extract 3, Bailey is quick to position homophobia in a comparative light with racism, here. Indeed, in line 2, along with the overweight, she cites both black people and Muslims as groups who it would be deemed unacceptable to ridicule on the television. In doing so, she takes a negative stance towards hate speech generally, enabling her to position herself as fair and just in contrast to those who ‘pick on gay people or trans people’ (lines 5-6). In doing so, Bailey implements the tactic of authorisation to position herself as a legitimate member of society – as a good citizen, in line with prevalent discourses of tolerance. As well as drawing attention to homophobia and transphobia, Bailey takes a stance against racism, mentioning not just Asian people but also black people (perhaps indexing her own membership to the latter category). However, in response to her question (‘why pick on gay people or trans people?’, lines 5-6), Kyle steps in with an apparent explanation for this perceived double standard by focusing exclusively on Asian people, using the categories of ‘Muslim’ and ‘Paki’ in lines 7-8. This supports the earlier analysis that the religion being discussed by Emma, Ryan and Josh was Islam, of course.

Importantly, by responding to Bailey’s broad rhetorical question regarding racism and homophobia with a specific reference to Islam, Kyle brings to the fore the shared perception within this CoP that Asian people are homophobic. He also echoes the sentiments of Ryan in Extract 3, suggesting that racism is taken more seriously than homophobia (‘if it were a Muslim goes up to a gay person and says homo, nothing gets done’, lines 11-12). Indeed, Kyle suggests that homophobia ‘should be classed as racism’ (lines 12-13), articulating his frustration that the two are apparently not treated as equally serious crimes. Like Ryan, he uses a hypothetical scenario to lay out this apparent injustice; though the young people did also talk of specific examples whereby they received homophobic abuse from their Asian peers (as in the extract which follows), the use of these hypothetical scenarios enables the construction of a clear double standard and an inequality between racists and homophobes.

Unlike Ryan, who positioned himself as the hypothetical perpetrator of racism and homophobia, Kyle speaks more generally by talking in the third person. However, he uses *you* as an indefinite pronoun in the scenario involving racism ('if you actually went up to a Muslim person and actually said *Paki...*', lines 7-10), framing it all in the future tense, and then the third person singular present tense to invoke the scenario involving homophobia ('a Muslim goes up to a gay person and says *homo...*', lines 10-12). In doing so, Kyle positions the racist scenario as a feasible future action – one that the use of 'you' suggests either he or Bailey, his interlocutor, might be involved in (though the repeated use of the adverb 'actually' implies that this is unlikely). The homophobic scenario, on the other hand, is constructed as something which certainly does happen, in the present tense, but by other people (whereby 'a Muslim' may also be 'they' or 's/he'). In taking on the temporary role of educator by answering Bailey's question, Kyle uses the tactic of authorisation to invoke knowledge and experience, adding further weight to this assertion despite its hypothetical nature.

Of crucial importance in Kyle's hypothetical scenario, of course, and unlike in Ryan's, is the explicit positioning of the agent of homophobia as a Muslim. This is central to the construction of this double standard; Kyle does not just claim that homophobia and racism are treated differently, as Ryan did, he suggests that *Muslim* people who are homophobic do not receive equal punishment to *gay* people who are racist. This is evident from his use of category labels: he frames the word 'Paki' as a slur against the category of 'Muslim' (lines 7-8), and then presents 'homo' as a comparatively negative label for a 'gay' person (line 11). As with Ryan's discourse in the previous extract, this again positions homosexuality and being Asian as mutually exclusive identities, excluding the possibility of a Muslim person who is also gay. The construction also reinforces the ideological binary between Asian people (who are allowed to be homophobic) and LGBT people (who are *not*

allowed to be racist), serving to strengthen the discursive construction of a clear in-group/out-group identity.

It is unsurprising, perhaps, that the data so far has shown the CoP members characterising Asian people – and the Muslim religion, specifically – as homophobic. Muslims have been demonized and positioned as a central target in ‘the war against terror’, leading to an increase in Islamophobic rhetoric from Far-Right groups (Puar 2007) and mainstream political rhetoric against immigration (Fassin and Surkis 2010). A consequence of such rhetoric, El-Tayeb (2012: 84) argues, is that Muslims are framed as a threat to Western society. Within the UK, Far-Right groups such as the British National Party (BNP) have positioned immigration, and Islam in particular, as a threat to British culture and liberal society; surprisingly, given the typically *non*-liberal stance of such groups, women’s and gay rights are often cited in this rhetoric as at risk. Indeed, as Haritaworn (2012: 74) demonstrates, groups such as the English Defence League (EDL), a British organisation with an anti-Islamic focus, make use of gay rights discourse to garner more support – at the time of writing, the EDL even have an ‘LGBT Division’. For such organisations, gay and lesbian rights can function as an icon of a progressive and civilised West, then, one which is being endangered by the comparatively uncivilised Global South. Not only are Muslims (who most Asian people are presumed to be) demonized by organisations such as the BNP and EDL, then, they are becoming synonymous with homophobia and intolerance. As the data in this section has illustrated, the young people’s discourse often reproduced these assumptions.

## **NON-ASIAN IDENTITY**

It has been argued so far that the young people in this LGBT group constructed a shared CoP identity based on their collective distinction from their Asian neighbours. It has also been shown, though, that the othering that the young people’s discourse entailed served

to authenticate their own status as legitimate citizens who should not be marginalised, as evident from their angry stance-taking against homophobia. An important aspect of this identity work, it has been shown, was to not only construct the out-group as homophobic and therefore fundamentally *other* to the values of the in-group, but to also construct the out-group as *not LGBT* as well as *Asian*. In turn, the young people's identity construction is primarily achieved by positioning themselves as *LGBT* and *not Asian*. As discussed already, this identity work serves to position race and sexuality as mutually exclusive concepts; there is no scope, within these interactions, for an Asian person to be LGBT (or vice versa).

This reflects Puar's (2007) claim that a particular kind of homosexual body has been normalised as a result of homonormativity and neoliberalism; she argues that a discourse of *homonationalism* exists in current mainstream Western culture, and specifically that the categories of 'Muslim' and 'gay' are seen as mutually exclusive. This point is mirrored by El-Tayeb (2012: 80), who argues that queer Muslims in Europe are largely invisible, not holding a recognisable identity to other Muslims *or* other queer people unless they reject Islam. Rights for gay people have been won largely on the basis that gay people are valid citizens, yet – as Agathangelou *et al* (2008) argue – the ideal queer citizen is typically white. Indeed, as illustrated by TV shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *The L Word* or *Queer as Folk*, mainstream media tend to portray gay and lesbian people as wealthy and white (Logie and Rwigema 2014: 175).

This raises an interesting question when analysing the identity work of this CoP of young people. In the data above, all the young people were engaged in constructing an identity which is enabled by the production of a binary between themselves as an in-group and Asian people as an out-group. Their in-group identity, it has been argued, was primarily concerned with their LGBT status, but also with their non-Asian status. But was this identity work also concerned with their *whiteness*, in contrast to the out-group's ethnic minority

status? Certainly, as argued above, the positioning of Asian people as an out-group is racist; the CoP members frame them as illegitimate citizens due to the relative intolerance they ascribe upon them, or – as in Josh’s turn in Extract 2 – as interlopers in what they perceive to be *their* country. In this sense, given that the majority of young people in this group are white, it would be feasible to argue that this construction of citizenship is also a construction of whiteness. Yet this would be to overlook two important aspects of their identity construction: firstly, during my ethnography the young people only ever used racist language to refer to South Asian people specifically (rather than any other ethnic minority group) and, secondly, there was a regular member of the group – who also engaged in this oppositional identity work – who was *not* white: Bailey.

As mentioned above, Bailey was of mixed racial heritage, with a white mother and black father. It was evident that she was relatively self-conscious about this – she once claimed during an informal, group conversation that she would be happy for the other CoP members to ‘call me *nigger* because it doesn’t bother me’. This struck me as an effort to erase differences between her and the other group members, both by giving them permission to use an in-group term to describe her and by rejecting any personal concerns about racism, presumably in an effort to show them that she was no different to them. Interestingly, Bailey also struck me as the most overtly racist of the young people, frequently talking about ‘Pakis’. In the extract below, which follows immediately from Extract 4, above, Bailey demonstrates her feelings about racism very clearly (whilst also contradicting her stance against hate speech):

#### Extract 5

- 1 B there’s these Muslim kids in my area an- (.) I’m not racist
- 2 but if someone lik- if a Pak- erm you know what I mean when I
- 3 say Paki? if a Paki comes up to me and makes fun of me:: I’ll
- 4 make fun of them for being a Paki because one of them came up
- 5 to me once and said ‘alright gay boy’ and I said ‘well that’s a
- 6 bit rich coming from a fucking Paki’ and shoved him out the way

7 and carried on walking. but funny thing is (.) my friends said I  
 8 should've apologised to him the next day but it's like (.) I know I-  
 9 I hate racism and I hate being racist but I'm not apologising when  
 10 they started it.

Here, Bailey tells the story of what she did when 'one of them' (line 4) was homophobic towards her, admitting to being racist but then, later, justifying her racism because the boy was homophobic first ('I hate being racist but I'm not apologising when they started it' lines 9-10). As in the previous examples, Bailey uses othering, third-person forms to position 'these Muslim kids' as an out-group, but her explicit description of her own racist behaviour stood out from the typical practice of the CoP. Also of interest here are Bailey's claims to be anti-prejudiced, stating 'I'm not racist' (line 1), 'I hate racism and I hate being racist' (line 9). Bailey draws on the same discourses of tolerance (Brown 2006) as others in the CoP in this moment, indicating that she acknowledges that racism is morally wrong according to the value system of the West. By explicitly claiming that she is against such behaviour, Bailey therefore makes use of the tactic of authorisation to show her legitimacy as a 'good British citizen'. She is unapologetic for her racism when it is in response to homophobia, however. Indeed, she positions 'Paki' as a term which it is acceptable to use as retaliation for somebody calling her 'gay-boy'<sup>7</sup>, a stance which reflects that of the group as a whole: that racism and homophobia are equal in terms of the offence they can cause, implying that LGBT people have the *right* to be racist.

Importantly, however, whereas the other young people (at least in their interviews with me) made use of the word 'Paki' only in the context of a hypothetical scenario when a person might be deliberately racist, Bailey's use of the term here is quite different. She uses it as a straightforward synonym for 'Asian' ('if a Paki...makes fun of me I'll make fun of them for being a Paki' lines 3-4), implying a lack of concern that this is a racist term. As a person of colour herself in a white-dominated town, she also reported experiencing racism, and this



may explain her contradictory concern to express her distaste for it as well as her untroubled use of racist terminology. Bailey's behaviour may also be explained when we consider the fact that her racism was targeted towards Asian people, specifically, who the CoP collectively positioned as the main out-group to whom they were opposed. In this sense, she engages in this moment in a shared practice of the group, and thus positions herself first and foremost with the locally salient persona of 'LGBT youth group member'.

A similar occurrence to this is noted by Nayak, whereby a British Asian boy in a school of mostly black and white children tended to 'overcompensate for his perceived difference through a fierce alignment with whiteness', achieved through overt racism towards his black peers (2003: 160). Membership of the CoP described above, by contrast, involves the practice of constructing an opposition with *Asian* people, specifically, due to the marked presence of this ethnic minority group in the town. In this sense, Bailey's own minority ethnic background did not prevent her from producing a group identity and thus positioning herself as a legitimate LGBT citizen; despite being non-*white*, she is – more importantly – non-*Asian*. Bailey was therefore able to minimise the differences between her and her fellow CoP members to emphasise their similarities, using the tactic of adequation to show that – despite the variation between her and the others (given she is bisexual, transgender and not white) – she could still be 'understood as sufficiently similar for current interactional purposes' (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 599). It was therefore a rejection of South Asian people *specifically* – rather than the production of a particularly *white* identity – that enabled the construction of an in-group identity for this CoP.

## DISCUSSION

I have argued above that the youths belonging to this CoP constructed a shared identity which was based around two main factors: their shared non-heteronormative status

and their distinction from Asian people. They were able to negotiate the heterogeneity which existed between them; despite being a group of young people who varied in their sexual orientation, ethnicity and gender identity, they worked together to construct an identity which was formed primarily in opposition to one particular out-group. Indeed, the young people constructed their identity through mutual stance-taking towards roles and identities which they positioned as *other*; the analysis above has provided examples of this stance-taking, revealing the common thread that ran through them as one which was concerned with constructing an opposition to Asian people (due to a presumed faith in Islam and the apparently inherent homophobic beliefs that come from this). This is, of course, identity work which was specific to this particular group; their intersecting social identities, residence in this particular town, and cultural experiences led to their stance-taking against the Asian out-group. As Valentine (2007: 18) puts it, ‘the contours of racial or class experiences can shape and reshape what gender or sexuality themselves can mean’. In this sense, it is clear from this research that a careful and considered focus on the ethnographic context in which interaction occurs is essential for a coherent analysis of identity work.

The label ‘LGBT’ is, of course, an umbrella term; it can be problematic when it is applied to a group of people who are framed as sharing certain characteristics, since lesbian, gay male, bisexual and transgender identities are in and of themselves multiple and diverse. Yet this CoP did work together to produce a mutual sense of self, one based on their shared experiences of homophobia and transphobia, and driven by their use of racist discourse to marginalise and demonise Asian people. Indeed, in the above extracts, tactic of distinction has been central to the young people’s identity construction, as they emphasised their difference to their Asian peers and neighbours by using polarising language to position them as the Other. In so doing, the young people frequently drew on their similarities to one another as a group, with each placing their non-Asian status and experiences of homophobia

as central to their identity work, thus using the tactic of adequation to emphasise that which they had in common rather than the differences between them. They also invoked powerful ideological discourses about what is 'right' or 'moral' by articulating their tolerance for difference yet also dismissing the 'uncivilised' views they assumed Asian people to have; in this way, they made use of both the tactics of authorisation and illegitimation. The young people's interaction, then, reflects Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) relational framework of intersubjective identity construction.

Of particular influence to this group of young people were, it has been argued, ideological discourses of homonormativity, homonationalism and Islamophobia; the young people's construction of the 'homophobic Muslim' persona ties neatly with the rhetoric of Far-Right groups in the UK, some of whom claim to be champions of LGBT rights. In this sense, the data and analysis provide evidence to support Bucholtz and Hall's (2005: 592) claim that identity positioning relates not only to the interactional moment and the norms of a given ethnographic context, but that it also encompasses macro-level discourses and ideologies. Similarly, the data reflects a relative lack of representation of Asian LGBT people in Western culture; it did not occur to these speakers that Asian people could also be LGBT, partly because it was assumed that all Asian people were homophobic<sup>8</sup>. The use of racist language and the essentialising of all Asian people as homophobes is extremely troubling, therefore: as well as revealing the salience of Islamophobic discourses in Britain today, it serves to isolate LGBT people of colour.

The data analysed in this article provides evidence of two important points in sociocultural linguistics, then: group identities may be constructed via oppositional positioning between an in-group and an out-group, and shared identity is often produced through the negotiation of broader cultural ideologies and discourses. Of particular relevance to scholars working in the area of language and sexuality is the evidence that this paper

provides of the potentially significant role that homonormative discourses play in the construction of LGBT identities. The young people's identity construction here is concerned not with their difference to heterosexual people, as has been found in previous work, but with their opposition to a perceived out-group based on ethnicity and on assumptions rooted in homonormative discourses. However, whilst these young people relied on extremely problematic ideologies to construct their identities as British LGBT people, their conversations did also indicate that they were part of a generation who will not tolerate homophobia. This small study suggests, then, that this is a generation who are determined to live a life in which they are open about their sexuality; the young people did not talk of having to hide their LGBT status, and did not experience any shame in being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. This, at least, may be viewed as one positive finding to emerge from this study, though the data remains indicative of broader issues concerning LGBT identity and homonationalist ideology. Future research into the impact of ethnicity and racial prejudice is therefore needed in relation to the study of language, gender and sexuality.

#### **TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS**

[	beginning of overlap
]	end of overlap
-	self- interruption or false start
/	latching (no pause between speaker turns)
(.)	pause of less than 1 second
(2)	timed pause
.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation
::	lengthening of sound
(XX)	emphatic breath
!	emphatic intonation
@(.)	laughing, plus duration
<u>underline</u>	emphatic stress or increased amplitude

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<sup>2</sup> This abbreviation of ‘Pakistani’ is broadly recognised as holding negative, racist connotations in the UK (Stokoe and Edwards 2007; McEnery *et al* 2000: 46).

<sup>3</sup> This, like all other names used in this paper, is a pseudonym.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Heteronormativity’ refers to the cultural expectation that people fall into the binary structure of male *or* female, with natural (hetero)sexual roles attached to each category.

<sup>5</sup> In British English, *fag* is a colloquial term for a cigarette (though its usage as a homophobic slur, as in North America, does also exist).

<sup>6</sup> In Northern British English dialects, *tret* often occurs as the past tense form of TREAT, just as the past tense form of MEET is *met* in Standard English (Beal 1993; Petyt 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Though Bailey identified as a transgender girl, she was frequently mistaken for a boy who wore feminine clothing.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, as well as an assumption that all Asian people are Muslim (and all Muslim people homophobic), this also shows an assumption that all Muslim people are of South Asian descent, effectively excluding those of other ethnicities who share this faith.